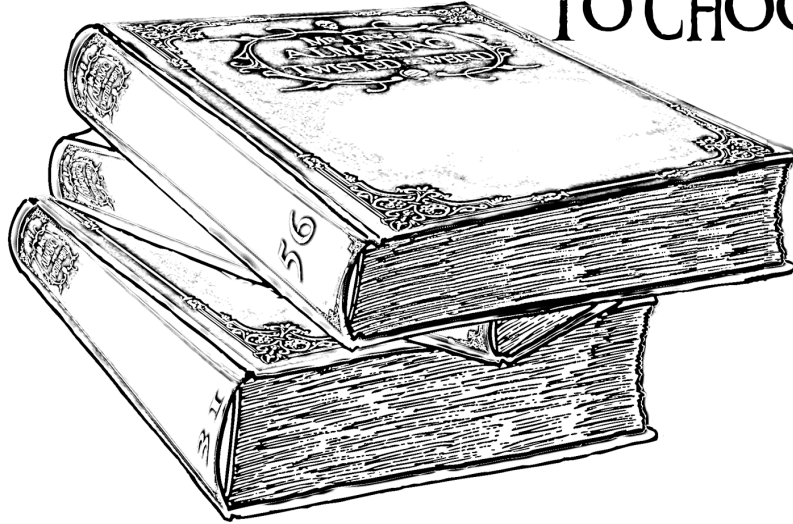


## CHAPTER 12 CHOOSING NOT TO CHOOSE



After Cindy abandoned him to do whatever it was that Cindy found interesting, Boyd found Mr. Ping's office, a softly lit room with walls lined with books of all sorts of ages, colors, shapes, and sizes. In the very center of the room was a large, antique Chinese desk with intricate carvings on the front and around the edges. Behind the desk was a big, comfortable red leather chair on wheels. The light from the room came from a single, lawyer's lamp with an emerald green shade that sat upon the desk.

"Hello?" Boyd asked into the empty room. "Ho Yin?"

No one answered his call. He walked into the room to explore. There were two, matching blue leather chairs set on either side of the door as he made his way in and Boyd soon realized that the books on the shelves all seemed to be antiques, books that were from years, if not centuries, ago. Very few of them had writing on the spines to signify what they were, and almost all of them had old, yellowed papers stuffed inside them that seemed to be notes written in Mandarin.

On the right hand side of the room was a long, flat table that was piled high with maps. Boyd walked over and looked through a

couple of them and realized that most of them were hand drawn and labeled in Mandarin, and that none of them seemed to be of any place he'd ever known. However, there was one map that he *did* recognize, if only because it was the most modern of all of them. It happened to be a road map of Frankfurter, Ontario, with a giant, red circle hovering over his very house on Dreary Lane.

The next thing he noticed was a series of identical books that were sitting upon the shelf directly behind Mr. Ping's desk. They were significant for the fact that there seemed to be well-over a hundred of them, each one of the same size, shape, and color, and each one labeled with a number, one to one hundred and three. He edged his way closer and saw that the thick spines contained the title of the book, which read, *Mr. Ping's Almanac of the Twisted and Weird*. He'd finally found the complete collection.

Taking one from the shelf (number seventeen, to be precise), Boyd began to thumb through the massive volume, trying to figure out what it was. Inside, he found pages upon pages of information, pictures, and statistics that seemed trivial. That is, it all seemed trivial until he stumbled upon an old drawing of what looked to be a twenty-foot tall man with one eye, raising a long stick of wood in rage at whoever the artist was. Below the picture was a caption that read, *The Cyclops of Western Borneo, 1916, drawing by Confucius Ping*<sup>58</sup>.

On the opposite page was an article that accompanied the picture with the title, *The Perilous Encounter with the Cyclops of Western Borneo (Or Bruno Gets Angry at Me)*, and it seemed to be about Mr. Ping, who happened to be on an expedition to find this Cyclops in the wilds of the Southeast Asian rainforest. It was fascinating to read, and as he flipped through the book, Boyd saw that every article had to do with something fantastic that happened in the year 1916. This led Boyd to realize that each of the books on the shelf had to do with a specific year of the twentieth century.

"Interesting reading?"

Boyd slammed the book shut and spun around to see Ho Yin standing in the doorway, smiling. "I was just...I, uh...I think..."

“Don’t worry, Boyd,” Ho Yin said. “I would hope that you would explore the office. There are probably things in here that we’ve all forgotten about.”

“Are these the almanacs?” Boyd asked.

“Yes,” Ho Yin said. He walked over to the shelf beside Boyd and pulled out one of the volumes, absentmindedly thumbing through it. He said, “Each year, Mr. Ping would scour the globe, looking for tales of the strange and unusual so that he might write them down.”

“What’s so special about these things?” Boyd asked.

Ho Yin looked at him seriously and said, “Do you think that the history books you have at school tell you everything that happened? I mean, think of the short life that you’ve led up to now. All the things you’ve done, the places you’ve seen, the people you know. Do you think one book could sum up all of that? History books only give you a part of the story, a part that has been twisted and manipulated and changed to fit what certain people want the average person to know. Mr. Ping’s job was to write down the information that would never make it into a history book. He wanted to document the fantastic stories that might have been forgotten if someone hadn’t written them down. That’s how Mr. Ping spent his time, and that is why his books are so important.”

“So that’s what all the displays and statues and stuff are?” Boyd said, the light coming into his eyes. “It’s all evidence of the things he’s found and written down in his books over the years.”

“We live in an amazing world,” Ho Yin said. “You should really take some time and read some of these almanacs. Mr. Ping lived an incredible life, as will you, if you decide to follow in his footsteps.”

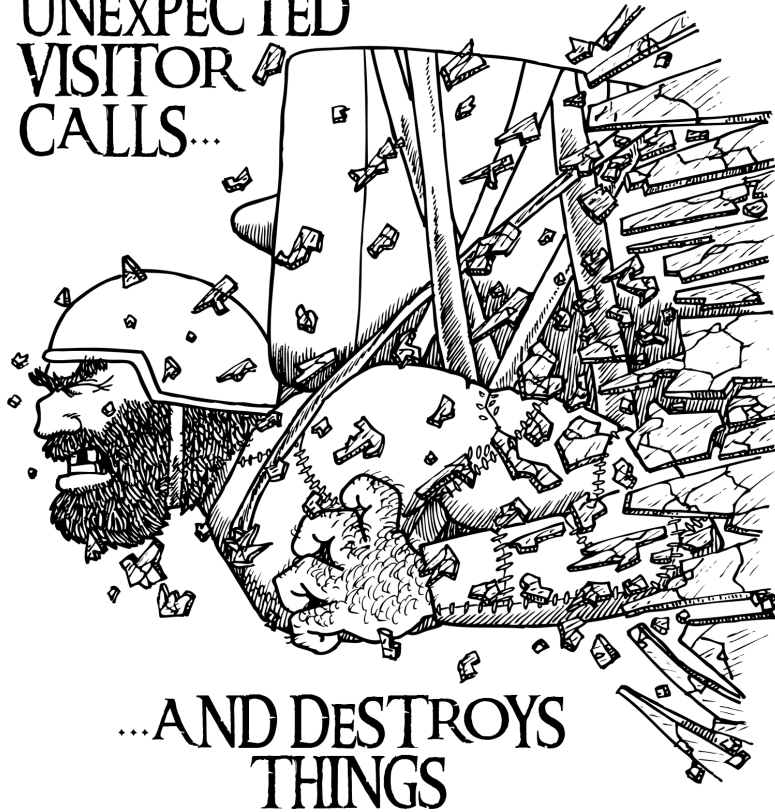
“I’m not interested in living an incredible life,” Boyd said. “All I want is to get my parents back.”

“As we all do,” Ho Yin said, putting his hand on Boyd’s shoulder to offer him some reassurance.



## AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR CALLS...

## CHAPTER 13



Boyd didn't sleep well that night. He was awoken the next morning by Cindy, standing fully dressed by the bed and staring at him. "Well?" she asked.

He rolled over away from her, trying to get a few more minutes of sleep. "Shouldn't you be annoying someone else right now?" he muttered into his pillow.

"Have you made your decision?" she asked.

"Go away," Boyd said.

"I want to know what your decision is going to be," Cindy said, her arms folded across her chest in an impatient manner.

"Go away!" Boyd said, still refusing to look at her.

Cindy stuck her chin in the air and said, "I'm not leaving here until..."

Stephens the Clock waddled away from the wall with a rumble, frightening poor Cindy half out of her wits. "Off with you, lassie," he said. His unsteady bulk made its way towards her and it frightened Cindy straight out of the room with a scream. "It's too early for all that claptrap. And you," he said, as he creaked around to look at Boyd, his face forming a sort of snarl, "Make sure you keep your mouth shut! I want to sleep until at least eight." At that moment, his chimes began to ring the hour of eight, bong, bong, bong. "Oh, drat!" Stephens yelled. "It's eight already. Your sister is a brat, young fellow."

After a long night of wrestling with his conscience, Boyd made the decision to not take Mr. Ping's job. The opportunity to live a life less ordinary was certainly appealing, but for Boyd, the danger of the job was in the absolute fear of the unknown. He wasn't sure he could handle always being on guard, always being worried about what might be lurking around the corner, always being scared that someone was going to come along and take it all away from him. These were fears that he didn't want to have for the rest of his life, and in fact, he wanted this whole episode to go away as quickly as possible. He thought that if he could get back to Ontario ASAP, the thought of it all would soon be forgotten.

Sure, there were bullies to go back to and a complete lack of popularity, plus the thought that his parents had been kidnapped by some unknown assailant, but he thought that these problems would be worked out eventually and all would be well and good, so he could go back to his normal little life without any real highs and lows. He tried to ignore the fact that Cindy would be disappointed, that he would never be rich, and that a life of high adventure would never be his.

Shame and cowardice are never pretty sights to see, so Boyd did his best to put on his game face as he walked through the hallway to tell Ho Yin the news. Ho Yin was in the back of the mansion in the grand ballroom that overlooked the city, where he was reading a newspaper and having a cup of tea in the early sun. The vista through

the giant glass wall behind him was breathtaking, the very embodiment of the opulence and glamour that Boyd was throwing away.

“Ho Yin,” Boyd said, “do you have a minute?”

“Absolutely,” Ho Yin said, putting down his newspaper and devoting his full attention to him. “Do you have a question for me?”

“Well, not exactly,” Boyd said, squirming.

It was then that Reggie led Cindy and Bjorn into the ballroom, purely by coincidence. “And really,” he was saying, “the décor would have been almost entirely different had I been in charge, but unfortunately, no one looks to a yeti for interior design advice. Oh, look who’s here!” They marched over by Boyd and Ho Yin, looking interested in what was going on. “We haven’t interrupted, have we?”

“Well, actually...” Boyd said.

“Boyd had a question,” Ho Yin said.

“Well, maybe I can answer it,” Reggie said.

“Could Reggie help?” Ho Yin asked.

“Well...” Boyd said.

“You look sick,” Cindy said to Boyd. “Are you gonna barf?”

“Well...” Boyd said.

Reggie looked surprised. “He’s going to give the answer!” he said.

“You are?” Ho Yin asked, smiling.

Bjorn grunted.

“Finally,” Cindy said, even though she hadn’t been waiting for any significant amount of time.

“Well, what will it be?” Reggie asked.

Boyd smiled at them, but it looked more like a grimace than a smile, and his throat began to swell as he tried to speak. Just as he was about to tell them, he noticed something just out the window over the horizon, and it stopped him in his tracks. It was a streak of cloud that formed a large arc over the far green mountains, almost like it was the exhaust from a missile. Only there was no missile that formed the trail. As the white smoke came closer and closer, Boyd saw that at the head of the streak was a man!

"What in the world is that?" he asked.

Everyone turned to see what was a rather large man, traveling at a very high rate of speed, straight for the mansion. "Bjorn! Reggie!" Ho Yin shouted as he jumped up from his chair. "Get Boyd and Cindy to safety!"

Like lightning, Bjorn snatched Cindy, dragging her along by the shirt with his fearsome jaws. "You're ripping my shirt!" she yelled as they disappeared into the mansion.

Reggie picked Boyd up, but wasn't quite as fast as Bjorn, and just as he turned to run, the "missile" man burst through the large window, shattering the clear barrier into a million pieces, all of which fell to the ground with a clamor. Glass went everywhere, as both Reggie and Ho Yin scrambled to the safety of the outer reaches of the ballroom.

The man who crashed through the window was wearing some sort of jet pack, which propelled him straight through the ballroom and deep into the far wall, sending paintings and furniture and plaster flying in all directions. The noise began to settle as the remaining pieces of glass fell from the giant window with a crash, and the last of the papers and molding from the wall dropped into the smoke that was wafting out from the hole where this mysterious figure crashed.

Reggie was on top of Boyd, protecting him from any debris that might have flown his way. Meanwhile, Boyd was peeking out from the Reggie's strands of white fur hanging in his face, trying to see what was lurking in the smoke and chaos.

"Are you okay, Boyd?" Reggie asked.

"Uh, yeah," Boyd said.

Reggie looked down at him and said, "This could get ugly. I want you to do what I say, when I say it. Okay?"

"No problem," Boyd said. He could feel his hands shaking uncontrollably as Reggie stood up in a defensive position.

"Ho Yin?" Reggie yelled. "Are you okay?" He couldn't see Ho Yin through the smoke.

"I'm okay," Ho Yin yelled from somewhere off in the distance.

A clatter was heard in the general direction of the smoke, as if whatever was in there was shrugging off half the wall that had fallen

upon it. A grunt was heard, and then it sounded as if a rather large man was shaking his head around, his jowls flapping as he growled. "ARR!" he yelled.

It was a man, and from what Boyd could see as he emerged from the smoke, it was a man who had to be at least ten feet tall and twice as wide. He was abnormally muscular, with long, black hair and a beard that hung down his chest. He wore what looked to be a jet engine on his back, which had been torn from an actual plane (and still had the airline's logo painted on its side). His brow was large and his eyes dark, and he wore clothes that were made of leather an inch thick.

"WHERE'S PING?" the man yelled, his voice so loud that it rattled the remaining windows.

Ho Yin stepped out from his hiding place, looking confident, yet defensive, as if he was dealing with a very dangerous individual. "Mr. Ping's dead, Barry," he said.

"THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT!" Barry said, with a smile. "THEN I CAN FINALLY TAKE WHAT'S MINE!"

"And what's that?" Reggie asked, also emerging from the smoke.

"**EVERYTHING HE OWNED!**" Barry said with a laugh. Once again, the laughter shook the windows.

"You know we can't let you do that," Ho Yin said.

Reggie leaned over his shoulder to Boyd, who was now hiding behind a staircase, and said, "It's Black Barry of Baltimore. Indestructible, except for his armpits. We're in a bit of a pickle here." Boyd nodded as Reggie turned back. His hands would not stop shaking.

"YOU CAN'T LET ME?" Black Barry yelled. "I DON'T THINK YOU HAVE A CHOICE, LITTLE MAN!"

Reggie appeared with rabbit-like quickness, swinging a giant, brass coat rack that he'd snatched from a corner straight at Black Barry's head, trying to get the jump on him. The coat rack bent like rubber, barely even causing him to flinch. Barry grabbed Reggie's arm, swung him around like he was a rag doll and tossed him through the upstairs wall with a thud.



Meanwhile, using Reggie's surprise attack as a distraction, Ho Yin jumped onto Black Barry's head, latching onto his hair like a dog latches onto a sock. Barry flung him around like a cowboy riding a bull, but though he was being wildly tossed around, Ho Yin held on. "Give it up, Barry!" he yelled. "We've beaten you a hundred times before. Today will be no different."

"ARR! YOU LITTLE RUNT!" Barry yelled. "I'M GONNA EAT YOU FOR DINNER!"

Barry reached over his head and grabbed Ho Yin, flinging him across the room, right into the marble banister of the grand staircase, leaving him unconscious on the floor. This large man let out a huff, as if he was glad to be rid of such pests and he dropped the jet from his back, where it clanked on the floor and slowly fell over on its side.

Boyd watched as he began to survey his surroundings, sniffing at the air like a giant from an old fairy tale that smelled a foreigner in his castle. "WHO'S THERE?" he yelled. "I CAN SMELL YOU LIKE AN OLD, MANGY DOG!"

He began to walk around the room, trying to get a bead on where the smell was coming from and Boyd realized that he now had two options. One was to wait where he was until this gargantuan creature found him and ate him in one large gulp, and the other was to run for his life and hope that Black Barry had a small attention span so that he would forget what he was chasing.

With fear filling his chest, Boyd burst from his hiding space, running full speed for the main hallway, trying to flee from Barry. "A RODENT!" Barry yelled, a wicked smile crossing his face. "THIS MANSION IS INFESTED WITH VERMIN!" He began to lumber after Boyd, moving with surprising speed for a man of his size. "I MUST RID MY NEW HOME OF SUCH CREATURES."

Boyd ran so fast it felt like his lungs were going to burst, but no matter how quickly he moved, Barry kept up with him. Finally, Barry pulled a large, leather whip from his belt and with a hard crack, he snapped it in Boyd's direction, its end whipping around his feet, sending him sprawling on the hardwood floors at the end of the long hall. As he scrambled and struggled to break free, Barry dragged him

all the way back down to where he was, picking Boyd up with one thick hand and holding him in front of his face.

“ARR,” he said. “I’VE NEVER SEEN A RUNT LIKE YOU AROUND THESE PARTS.” He turned Boyd from side to side as if he’d never seen a kid before. “ARE YOU WHITE MEAT OR DARK MEAT? OH, NEVER MIND. YOU’LL MAKE A RIGHT NICE APPETIZER. NOW, WHERE’S THE KITCHEN?”

Black Barry threw Boyd under his arm and began to explore the mansion, causing a general commotion everywhere he went, slinging Boyd every which way and knocking over everything in his path. Although he was terrified of this large, loud, smelly man, Boyd managed to make an assessment of the situation. Reggie said that Black Barry’s only weakness was his armpits, and at that moment, that’s where Boyd was caught, and man, oh, man, did it ever stink.

He looked at Barry’s thick, leather shirt and saw that it was sewn together at the shoulder with some type of cord. Seizing the opportunity, he reached into his pocket and fished out his Swiss army knife. While Black Barry was distracted with his search for the kitchen, Boyd began to saw the thick cord in half, making a hole in the armpit.

“ARR,” Barry said, “I CAN’T FIND ANYTHING IN THIS STUPID PLACE!”

As soon as he got a hole big enough for his hand, a putrid, foul odor burst forth from the seam, as if an old, airtight coffin had been opened after hundreds of years. Barry must have felt the cool breeze in his weak area, as he glanced down at Boyd. “WHA..?” he said.

But it was too late! Boyd had already rammed his hand into the gooey, wet, grossness of the hole and grabbed onto a large wad of Barry’s armpit hair. The hairs were like wet straw and Boyd pulled on them with all of his might, trying to fell his captor.

Barry let out a howl of pain unlike anything that Boyd had ever heard before and as he flailed around, Boyd held on for dear life, knowing he had the advantage. Barry fell to the ground, his ten-foot frame unable to move under Boyd’s death grip.

“ARR!” Barry yelled. “MERCY! MERCY!”

Boyd had regained his footing beside Barry, but was caught at an awkward angle, as his hand was still buried in the big man's armpit. The fact that Barry's gooey sweat was now running down Boyd's arm didn't help matters either.

"Reggie?" Boyd yelled. "Ho Yin? I think I need some help here."

Boyd had Barry at his mercy, but they were at a standstill. Like a classic game of chicken, if Boyd were to remove his hand from Barry's armpit, then he was sure that Barry would not make the same mistake twice and eat him right then and there. However, if Boyd were to have pulled the armpit hair any harder, Barry would lose all control and come barreling down on top of him. He wasn't sure that having a ten-foot tall, five foot wide lunkhead on top of him was the best idea.

"LET GO OF ME PIT HAIR, SON, AND I'LL PROMISE YA HALF O' EVERYTHING I GOT!" Barry said, wincing from the pain under his arm.

"You don't seem like the trustworthy type," Boyd said. "I'll take my chances with what I'm doing."

"ARR! YA LITTLE RUNT!" Barry spat. "IF I GET OUTTA THIS MESS, I'M GONNA EAT YA, THEN PUKE YA UP, THEN EAT YA AGAIN!"

"That's a charming thought," Boyd said, tugging at the hair in his hand to prevent this tough guy from any more tough guy talk.

"OW!" he yelled. "I WAS JUST KIDDIN'!"

They stood there for a few seconds, Boyd trapped in Barry's armpit, and Barry unable to move from his position. "Who are you?" Boyd asked.

"I'M YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE! I'M...OW! SORRY, SORRY! I'M AN ENEMY OF PING'S. HIS BIGGEST, TOUGHEST, MOST WORTHY OPPONENT. EXCEPT, OF COURSE, FOR THIS HERE ARMPIT THING."

"Mr. Ping's dead," Boyd said, feeling queasy from the stench of Barry's armpits. "Isn't it time for you to move on?"

“PING’S DEAD! WE *KNOW* THAT! THAT MEANS IT’S FREE REIGN, RUNT! THE CONSPIRICETTI WILL FINALLY HAVE THEIR WAY.”

“The what?” Boyd asked. Little did he know that Barry had maneuvered his other hand around the handle of the ax on his belt and quietly unlatched the hook.

“YOU DON’T KNOW THE CONSPIRICETTI?” Barry asked, and just as he did, Boyd could feel him shifting his weight around. He knew that he had mere seconds.

Barry swung his ax around at Boyd in an attempt to chop off his arm, but Boyd pulled away just in time, but not before taking a fair amount of the pit hair with him, the sticky, gooey wad like a scouring pad in his hand.

Barry let out a howl and he spun around as if he’d been shot by a hundred bullets at once, before falling to the ground, unconscious. Boyd looked at the hair in his hands and saw that it was squirming around like worms poking their head out of the ground. He quickly dropped the foul handful, watching all of it wriggle off in different directions into the outer reaches of the mansion.

He walked over and saw that, sure enough, Barry was as unconscious as he could ever have been. Just as he breathed a major sigh of relief, Ho Yin and Reggie came limping into the room. “Boyd!” Ho Yin said. “Are you okay?”

“Look at this, Ho Yin,” Reggie said, standing over Barry. “The bloomin’ boulder’s out cold!”

“What?” Ho Yin asked, running over. He turned to Boyd with a shocked look on his face. “How did you do this?” he asked.

“Reggie said his armpits were his weak point,” Boyd said. “I pulled out his armpit hair.”

“Oooo,” Reggie said, looking concerned. “Let me see that hand, mate.”

Boyd raised his hand, which was now purple and black from having been under Barry’s arm. “We’d best get you something for that hand,” Reggie said. “Sticking your hand in his pits is like sticking your hand on radioactive plutonium. Come with me, mate.”

As it turns out, Reggie, Ho Yin, and Mr. Ping had dealt with Black Barry of Baltimore several times in the past, always having to find some cunning way in which to deal with him. He was indestructible, except for his armpits, and in their last few battles over the years, he'd made it harder and harder to reach them. One time, they had to drop him in a giant vat of concrete, another they had to leave him on an island in the South Pacific, far enough away from land so that he had no hope of swimming. Yet, never before had anyone rendered Black Barry unconscious by removal of the hair from under his arm.

"It must have been horribly painful," Reggie said.

Cindy and Bjorn joined the three of them in Mr. Ping's secret laboratories that were located just behind the greenhouse. Black Barry of Baltimore had been taken away by a team of Hong Kong police officers that were used to dealing with people like him, and Ho Yin was busy examining one of Barry's hairs that they'd managed to capture before it crawled away. Boyd sat in the corner of the lab, trying to regain the feeling in his hand, as some strange chemical in Barry's sweat had left it numb.

"Amazing," Ho Yin said, looking through a microscope at the hair. "It's alive!"

"Let me see, let me see," Cindy said, squirming to get in front of him. She looked in and said, "Whoa! It seems to be multiplying in a classic, mitochondrial pattern..."

Everyone looked at her as if she'd just spoken Chinese.

"Uh, I just made that up..." she said, smiling in an embarrassed way.

"Did you say that there were a handful of these that got loose in here?" Ho Yin asked.

"Yeah," Boyd said.

Ho Yin put his hand to his chin, looking concerned. "Hmm," he said. "There's no telling what those things will turn into. Snakes, lizards, floating skeletons. It can't be good. Bjorn, will you get your X-500<sup>59</sup> for me?"

Bjorn grunted and walked over to a box, whereupon he pulled out a tiny robot that was about the size of a box of matches. Using his

large paws, he daintily set it down on the counter, then pulled out a remote control from the same box and pressed a button that made the tiny robot sprout legs like a spider and walk around.

Pressing more buttons, Bjorn made the robot go over and “sniff” Black Barry’s armpit hair, and then it took off, crawling down the side of the table and out the door. “That should take care of that,” Ho Yin said. “Thanks, Bjorn.”

Bjorn grunted.

Ho Yin came over and sat beside Boyd. “That was excellent work you did in there, Boyd,” he said. “Mr. Ping would be proud that you are his successor.”

“Well,” Boyd said, squirming, “I don’t know if I’m the right person for the job.”

Ho Yin smiled. “Having doubts?” he asked.

“Well, it’s just that there are probably better people for the job than me. I mean, I’m just a kid. There’s nothing brave or special about me. I got lucky. That’s all.”

“Luck is simply how you react when an opportunity presents itself,” Ho Yin said. “Personally, I think you’re the perfect person for this job. Do you know why? It’s not because you’re the strongest or the bravest or the fastest. It’s not because you’re the smartest or most popular or had the best grades in school. It’s because you, more than anyone else I’ve known, know the difference between right and wrong.

“We’ve watched you for years, Boyd, just to make sure that you were the right person for such an important task, and in every choice you’ve made, you’ve chosen the right way. You’ve made moral decisions that didn’t just benefit you, they also benefit others. It could have been little things, like when the lunch lady forgot to charge you for your lunch, but you paid her anyway. Or when you let your friend, Billy, have the last ice cream sandwich that day at your house. Or it could be something big, like when you stood up to Tucker Stevens the day we came for you. Either way, these aren’t the everyday decisions of your average person. These are the decisions of a person with a good heart, and that good heart is the reason we want you to take over this special task. We’re just giving you the opportunity to spread your influence.

You could change the world, Boyd, but only if you want to. It all rests on your shoulders.”

Boyd let the words sink into his head. Ho Yin was right. It wasn't about the money or the adventure. It was about doing the right thing, and in that moment, he realized that if there were people out there who were willing to kidnap his parents, like Mr. Fang was, or hurt innocent people, like those panjas at the airport, or even if there was someone like Black Barry of Baltimore out there, who would have eaten Boyd whole if he'd had the chance, then those people needed someone to stand up to them. They were the Tuckers of the real world, and if Mr. Ping was no longer around to protect us, then who would that person be? In that moment, he knew what he had to do.

“Okay,” Boyd said to Ho Yin. “I'll do it.”

